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ABSTRACT

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RUNNING-AWAY: A DEFINITIONAL DILEMMA

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Abstract

The broader question regarding the issue of runaways as a social problem requires incidence figures to estimate the extent of this problem. This paper examines how differing definitions used to describe running away can produce varying estimates of incidence. Due to these variations, levels of incidence range from a low of .0011% to a high of 24.3%.

This paper suggests that the definition employed and the resultant estimates of incidence can affect the public's role in providing programming to meet the basic survival needs of youth who runaway.

Introduction

Within the past decade, it has become apparent that youth who run away from home are considered to be a significant social problem. From the mid 1960's to the present, much attention, especially in policy and legislative circles, has been focused on the increasing numbers of youth who have left their parents or guardians before reaching the legal age of majority.

The apparent existence of large numbers of runaways has raised numerous questions about the extent and nature of running away. Two critical areas where our knowledge is lacking, as identified in studies by Walker (1975) and Brennan, et al., (BREC; 1975A), are: 1) confusion regarding the "definition" of running away; and 2) lack of knowledge regarding the actual extent and incidence of running away. Before any study attempts to measure incidence, the definitional problems must be resolved. An operational definition requires more knowledge of the special characterization of runaways (BREC; 1975A).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how various definitions used to describe a runaway can produce varying estimates of incidence. It is not intended to create or propose a definition to describe either running away, runaways, or runaway. I acknowledge at the onset that many complex variables have been included in the numerous definitions of runaway. A number of definitions exist and different ones are suited for particular studies.

Various levels of incidence of running away have been reported from a low of .0011% in the Uniform Crime Reports (published annually by the Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation) and a high of 24.3% in the Behavioral Research Evaluation Corporation's youth needs study (BREC; 1975B). All are speaking to the same phenomena - running away from home; however, all of the following studies and reports utilize slightly differing definitions of the event. Those employing police reports are at the lowest limit (.0011%); those employing an away from home for 24 hours definition are consistent and are in the lower to middle range (2.06% - 6.6%); and those employing a self-reported definition are at the higher limit (24.3%).**

Background

Depending upon who is asked and what construct is used, it is clear that differing incidence levels result. What is evident is that different people at different periods in time have different perceptions of what running away is. Historically, running away has been viewed differently and responded to differently depending on the broader social conditions. As early as 1647, ships bound for Virginia were carrying upwards to 1,400 to 1,500 children to Virginia (Bureau of Labor Statistics - No. 312). These children probably were on board for various reasons. However, it is conceivable many of these children probably were running from the 'old world' to the 'new world' in search of the new frontier. In all probability, these

** Unless otherwise stated, the incidence uses a base of households which have at least one youth age 10 to 17 in them. This is approximately one-quarter of all households.

youth were not defined as runaways, but may have been called lost, or wandering or incorrigible (families may have sold them to the ship captains). In those days, if these youth were over 14 years of age they were considered socially responsible. From a 17th century perspective many of the youth included in the current incidence levels (average age about 15-1/2 to 16 years of age, see Gold; 1967 and 1972, and BREC; 1975A and 1975B) would be considered responsible adults and not runaways.

Between the Civil War and the close of the nineteenth century, the U.S. was experiencing phenomenal industrial expansion. There was a great economic need for youth especially wandering youth (an earlier definition of homeless youth for any number of reasons) to work in various industries (Dulles; 1966). It could be speculated the economic need was a lure for youth to leave home. Again, youth over 14 were considered socially responsible. Could these youth be considered runaways? Based on current definition: yes.

The depression of the late 20's and 30's created many economic hardships. Behind the immediate cause for youth leaving home was found a complication of economic and social maladjustment factors, with many families being on relief or having the chief breadwinners unemployed (Outland; 1937). Transiency of whole groups of unemployed persons was considered a social problem. Many youth by current definition who had runaway were labelled juvenile transients. Economic insufficiency was probably the most causal factor in juvenile transiency (Outland; 1938). The Federal Transient Service (FTS) was created

in 1933 (to 1935) to deal with the problems of transient people.

A youth had to be 16 or over to qualify for aid. In the 1940's there again was a need for youth in the labor market, and many youth found jobs in the War industry.

Discussion

In the past, the most widely used sources for determining incidence of running away have been police reports from local communities. This could include both missing person reports and arrest records (Walker; 1975). As mentioned previously, the Uniform Crime Reports - (UCR) is the only official estimate of runaway youth. According to the UCR, in 1974 there were 154,682 runaway arrests or a .0011% incidence level (rate per 100,000 = 115.4) based on 5,298 agencies' reports;** in 1973 there were 178,457 runaway arrests or a .0011% incidence level (rate per 100,000 = 115.1) based on 6,004 agencies' reports; and in 1972, there were 199,863 runaway arrests or a .0012% incidence level (rate per 100,000 = 120.2) based on 6,195 agencies' reports. Both the runaway and missing person reports are underestimates of the earlier discussed incidence levels of the actual number of runaway youth. Many cases are not reported as missing persons and many youth are not arrested for running away by the police (Walker; 1975).

** These figures represent arrest rates per 100,000 persons. These incidence levels are not youth exclusive. These figures are somewhat higher if arrest rates for running away are calculated for youth (11-18) only. The population base is the total number of persons represented by the agencies' reporting.

Shellow (1967), highlights the inadequacies of using official data to estimate the incidence of running away, in a study on suburban runaways in the 1960's. Although the study did not explore the extent of running away, it did investigate the nature of the runaway event. Data on runaways were primarily collected in cooperation with a local police department. Runaways were identified through missing persons reports. Other information on these were obtained through police, court and school records. Some data were collected through personal interviews. A comparison sample of youth was drawn from the public secondary school system. The researchers from the onset of this study recognized that runaways reported to the police were just the "tip of the iceberg" (Shellow; p. 27). Data from the comparison group did show that only one out of six self-reported runaways had been reported missing (Shellow; p. 27). The authors do note that running away is more predominate than missing person reports would indicate (Shellow; p. 27).

In response to a growing public concern about the problems of runaway youth, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare in September 1973 (one year prior to passage of Title III, P.L. 93-415, The Runaway Youth Act) acted to utilize existing programs by combining numerous Departmental activities into one intensive effort. The primary focus of this effort was to plan and develop programs to alleviate and prevent the problems of runaway youth.

The coordination of this effort was carried out through establishment of an Intra-Departmental Committee on Runaway Youth. Committee

membership included agencies concerned primarily with the health, education, and welfare of youth, specifically runaways. Committee participation also included the Justice Department and representatives from national organizations serving runaway youth.

The Intra-Departmental Committee initially concluded there was a lack of definitive information about the problem of runaway youth on which policy, planning, and programmatic decisions could be based. Although there were strong indications that many of these youth were in need of services especially in the immediate crisis situation in order to minimize the potential for injury while the youth was away from home, validated information about the nature and scope of the problem was not conclusive.

This committee also determined that accurate nationally representative data estimating incidence was not currently available. There is a need for national data to better understand the incidence of running away, the various types of runaways, and what kinds of services are needed. National data are needed to provide incidence estimates on the extent and degree of the runaway problem and to provide policy makers with a basis for resource allocation. Local data are needed to provide local policy makers with data to plan for social services.

The central questions needed to be addressed in collecting national incidence data include: 1) how feasible is it to conduct a national survey; 2) what definitions of running away should be used to collect

these data; 3) what kinds of data should be collected; and 4) what methods should be used to collect these data.

The Department of HEW in June 1974 contracted Behavioral Research Evaluation Corporation (BREC) of Boulder, Colorado to test these feasibility issues in conducting a national statistical survey (BREC; 1975A). This study included a probability sample of 2640 households in the Denver, Colorado area screened for the existence of runaway youth, ages 10-17. The study also included a rural sample of 640 youth households in the northeast section of Colorado as well as a purposive sample consisting of households known to have had a runaway experience in the year prior to the study.** These latter households were identified by agencies (primarily the police) that came into contact with runaways and included to obtain an estimate of "false negatives." *** Of approximately 678 purposive youth households identified in this way as having had a runaway experience, 139 agreed to participate (a .79 refusal rate). Since the probability sample produced 26 cases of runaways (incidence to be discussed below). BREC interviewed 165 runaways and their families.

Three data collection instruments were developed for this incidence study (see BREC; 1975A) - a screening instrument to estimate the incidence of runaway and to perform the basic classification

** It should be noted that all those in the purposive sample were contacted by the agency who maintained their record and that the respondent had agreed to participate beforehand.

*** Parent indicating no runaway episode in household but the youth or sibling indicating there was.

of families; a parent questionnaire (parent report) to provide information about the runaway and the episode(s) from the parent's point of view, and a youth questionnaire (youth report) to provide information on many of the same questions from the youth's point of view. The parent report served as a kind of validation of the youth report and vice versa.

The definition of runaway in the BREC analysis included four components: 1) gone from home without parental permission or consent; 2) stated intend to run away; 3) length of time gone; and 4) parent or youth report. Length of time gone from home was added so a determination could be made on whether a case was trivial (i.e., gone to the movies for a few hours without the parent's knowledge) or not trivial.

Based on the parent report, 2.06% of the youth population (4.24% of youth households with youth 10-17) had run away from home during the previous twelve month period. When this estimate is corrected for youth households with a false-negative, 3.63% of the youth population (7.13% of youth households) had run away during the previous twelve month period. In addition, 1.76% of all youth (3.76% of youth households) had run away for periods of 24 hours (described in the study as a serious runaway) or longer (also see Walker; 1975). Using an eight hour criterion for time away from home, 24% of the probability sample and 12% of the purposive sample were not gone overnight. Using the 24 hour criterion, 76% of the probability and 88% of the purposive sample were gone overnight or longer (BREC calls this the serious runaway group).

BREC's earlier feasibility study provided test instruments to be utilized in the National Statistical Survey. The National Statistical Survey on runaway youth is mandated by Title III, Sec. 321 (Part B) of the 'Runaway Youth Act' (P.L. 93-415). One of the purposes of the survey is to define the major characteristics of the runaway youth population and determine the areas of the nation most affected. This survey is divided into two phases: Phase I performed by UNCO Inc. is a telephone survey of parents in 4,250 households which have at least one youth 10-17. A runaway is defined as youth who have been away from home at least overnight without parental permission (24 episodic definition). The study is not yet completed, however the preliminary incidence levels are 3.7% of youth households. This level is slightly higher than reported in the BREC feasibility study. In this study, as in the earlier BREC one, there is a substantial number of false-negatives; specifically, 2.7% of a randomly selected group of youth from the households reported said they had runaway when the parents said they had not. There is also a false-positive response, of as yet undefined proportions in which a parent reports a runaway occurred and the youth does not.

Phase II of this survey is being conducted by Opinion Research Corporation (ORC), Princeton, New Jersey. The purpose of this phase is to develop statistically reliable estimates for the incidence for runaways, ages 10-17, for the calendar year 1975, through a telephone survey of 60,000 households; and through in-depth interviews

of a nationally representative sample of youth households reporting a runaway (obtained through the telephone survey), to obtain behavioral, episodic and services utilization data to compare with data collected from a matched, non-runaway youth household control sample (also obtained through the telephone survey).

Concurrently, the same interview schedules will be used with a purposive sample of 400 youth in current runaway status (non-returners) in at least 36 SMSA's. A sub-sample of Black runaways is being identified and interviewed in 6 SMSA's by the Urban League to provide a check on reported race related differences, if any.

The survey is not yet completed. Preliminary data on 60,000 households screened during the telephone survey indicates that 27% were households with youth between 10-17. Of these youth households, 3.00% reported a youth away at least overnight without parental permission during calendar year 1975. These youth households also reported an even larger percent (approximately 5.7%) of youth away without parental permission but who were away less than overnight (the trivial runaways).** These figures have not yet been adjusted or weighted. It is expected these figures will rise when adjustments are made for false-negative reports. The figures are within the range of the BREC feasibility study and Phase I of the survey.

** The prevalence figures shows that one out of every ten youth age 10-17 has runaway at some point in their lifetime.

It should be noted that these three studies are using essentially the same definition of runaway (24 hour criterion).

In addition to the data generated by the BREC feasibility study, HEW contracted with the Institute for Social Research (ISR), University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan for a special analysis of its data.** ISR maintains a data base from the 1967 and 1972 National Survey of Youth. This data base includes information on youth who have runaway from home. The initial hope was to make historical trend comparisons of these data with the BREC feasibility data. However, due to differing sampling and interviewing methods, the BREC feasibility data and the ISR data were not comparable. The ISR data however, did provide rough incidence estimates to provide a picture on the extent of the runaway problem for the year surveyed.

Data for the 1967 survey were obtained from interviews with a national random sample of 847 youth 13 to 16 years old. Data for the 1972 survey were obtained from interviews with a national random sample of 1395 youth, 11 to 17 years old.

The 1967 survey (13-16 year olds) reports a 5.5% incidence level within the previous three year period. (It should be noted this level reflects the late 1960's when running away was receiving increasing media attention focused on the so-called "hippies.")

** The data were derived from the National Surveys of Youth 1967 and 1972 of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and were provided by Dr. Martin Gold and Ms. Patricia Tomlin.

The 1972 survey (11-17 year olds) reports a 6.3% incidence level, while the level for 13-16 for that survey is 6.6% with the previous three year period.

Local runaway incidence estimates are reported in a study recently completed for the Department by Behavioral Research Evaluation Corporation: Youth Needs Study - Theory Validation and Aggregate National Data: Integration Report of the Office of Youth Development Research, FY 1975 (BREC; 1975B). This report is one volume of a series of reports in which Community Planning and Feedback instruments were tested in 10 youth service system projects during Fiscal Year (FY) 1975. The instruments were designed to provide planning information which will allow a community to use its community resources more effectively in providing service responsive to youth needs (Brennan; 1975B). The report includes cross-project data on self-reported delinquent behavior (although many people do not consider running away a delinquent act, it is included on the delinquency scale). The youth in this study were interviewed in the school setting (one set of interviews were in youth homes). The self-reported incidence levels averaged 13.2% reported for 8 of the 10 sites (two of the sites did not allow this scale to be administered in a school setting) with N=7818. (The delinquency behavior items refer to behavior occurring during the two months prior to the date of the youth interview.)

Across the eight projects incidence levels range from a low of 5.5% to a high of 24.3% (incidence levels for the 6 other sites

range from 10.4% - 16.1%). At the site with a 24.3 level, (site A) the interviews were administered by peers. Whereas at all other sites the interviewers were adults. BREC suggests that this factor appears to have depressed the levels of acknowledged runaway (at site B) activity and the results should be viewed with caution. The 5.5% level in site B is consistent with Gold (1967 and 1972) as well as BREC's earlier feasibility study. It is possible that the 24.3% level at site A is elevated and should be also viewed with caution. Peer interviewing at site A may have resulted in high false self-reporting. All site A self-reports on the delinquency items are consistently elevated beyond self-reported levels in seven other sites where interviewing was conducted by adults. The effect of interview ~~age~~ on youth responses should be further investigated.

. In a review of the literature (Walker; 1975) some authors view running away as a positive behavior and some as a negative behavior. More specifically, it depends on how one perceives the actual episode whether it is considered a runaway. For instance, consider the following short case example. A girl is beaten by her alcoholic father. As a result of the bruises, she stays away from school. The school calls the father to inform him of his of daughter's absence. The father again beats the girl. Because of the abuse the girl leaves home, the father calls the police. She is picked up two days later and placed in a detention facility. Is she a runaway? Another example: A youth goes to a rock concert without parental permission and is

gone two days and intends to return home. The event is not interpreted by parent or youth as a runaway. However, in a similar case, the parents call the police. Are these runaways? Is this a positive or negative experience; and from who's perspective?

The BREC feasibility study in the in-depth interview includes an item asking parents if they interpreted their youth's episode as a runaway.** About 33% of the parents interviewed did not perceive the as a runaway. Approximately 32% of youth surveyed did not think they were running away. It is also interesting that 33% of the parents did not think that running away was against the law. In the parent report for 10-13 year olds, 48% of the parents did not consider the event a runaway (BREC; 1975A). An identical percentage (33%) of parents of males and of females did not interpret the event as a runaway. However a higher proportion of parents of females than of males (39%:24%) did not think running away was against the law. Looking at racial differences on the perception of the event, a higher percentage of anglo parents did not interpret the event as runaway than did non-anglo parents (35%:23%). A higher percentage of anglo parents than non-anglo parents did not think running away was against the law (36%:22%), and a higher percentage of anglos than non-anglos youth did not interpret the event as a runaway (33%:28%).

** This question was asked after the parents had affirmed that their son or daughter had been gone from home without their permission or consent.

One of the important factors affecting incidence estimates is the length of time the youth is away before it is called running away. The BREC feasibility study employed a behavioral definition in the initial telephone 'screening in' of candidates for the in-depth interview (BREC; 1975A, p. 62). Essentially the definition was 'any youth 10-18 away from home during the past year, without parental permission or consent.' During the in-depth interview, a time away from home dimension was added (8 hours and 24 hours) to differentiate among runaways. The 8 hour definition could include trivial episodes such as a youth going to a movie and not telling the parents, or a youth who leaves for several hours to let off steam and then returns. BREC (1975A; P. 232) contends that an 8 hour behavioral definition is less desirable than a 24 hour definition. BREC does point out however, that using this behavioral definition may exclude those instances where a serious runaway was planned, partially executed, but terminated within a few hours due to the youth's apprehension by parents or police. They recommend using a criterion of gone at least 24 hours. BREC recommends that if a study is to examine the etiology by runaway behavior (in addition to just incidence), these cases of runaway should not be excluded as trivial because it is less than that. BREC states however that psychologically, time away from home is not central to the runaway motives and background (BREC; 1975A; P. 63). The study indicates that for the 24 hour

criterion, both the parent and youth provide approximate equal accuracy in identifying runaway youth households (BREC; 1975A; p. 217).

Using official data in estimating incidence is not recommended because of inherent inaccuracies. Using the weaker BREC 8 hour definition of runaway, only 41% of the estimated number of runaways, would have appeared in official records.

Runaway as defined by self-reporting methods, relies on the respondents own construct of what a runaway is. Gold (1967 and 1972) uses self reports in estimating the incidence of running away. Gold included various measures to indicate the seriousness of the event. In 1967 and 1972, Gold had the interviewer validate the response and determine if the incident reported was trivial or non-trivial. In the 1972 survey a runaway was considered trivial if; 1) the respondent returned of his own volition before parents/or guardians realized he/she was gone and he/she had not been out overnight; or 2) the respondent spent every night with relatives who also knew where the respondent was during the days after arrival at their home; or 3) the respondent informed the parents (or had someone else inform them) where they were before the time they were next expected home (e.g., suppertime, bedtime) and obtained their permission to stay there (Gold; 1972). Using this construct, incidence levels are slightly higher (6.3%: 3.6%) than the BREC feasibility study.

Using a self-reported youth's own definition of runaway without interviewer validation on triviality can produce high levels of incidence.

Walker (1975; p. 8) indicates that self-reported behavior in the literature is difficult to compare because of differing sampling procedures (e.g., non-delinquent youth, incarcerated delinquents, one-time delinquent offenders, etc.) and differing time referents applied to the runaway item (within the last 2 months, year, three years, etc.). The time interval being surveyed is a critical element in obtaining accurate incidence estimates (e.g., within the past year..., have you ever..., during the preceding two months..., etc.). Going back a year or more may elicit unsure responses as to the actual number of episodes and the nature of the event. The results may also be dependent on the season when the survey was conducted.

Concerns in Formulating National Policy

For national planning policy purposes, using a definition less than overnight is probably not advisable. The government is funding runaway programs that must at least provide overnight shelter. If a youth leaves for a few hours, consider himself a runaway and returns home, there is no implication for national policy (it is recognized however, that in some instances this youth may be a future serious runaway). Incidence combined with episodic data has more implication for national policy because of the youth's potential survival needs.

National policy is concerned primarily with the broader scope of the problem. Local planners and service providers have concerns more specific to that particular community. The broader question regarding the issues of runaways as a social problem

require incidence figures to estimate the extent of the problem generally for budgetary and broad programmatic. Local estimates need to be more detailed so that the community can provide services tailored to their specific needs.

Incidence estimates can aid national policy and program planning by providing measures for which funds can be allocated to support runaway houses and other facilities. The nature of the runaway problem varies nationally and locally in terms of not only the legal definition of runaway, but in terms of the differing types of runaway behavior. One local community may be concerned about a certain type of runaway such as the 'street kid', while a suburban community may be concerned with the runaway who runs for a few days to get his/her parents' attention. Some communities may be in greater need of Federal support than others.

Under most circumstances, however, there is a concern for the effects of the event on both the community and the youth. The community is the victim if the youth steals a car. The youth is the victim if there has been abuse and neglect prior to the episode, exploitation during the episode, and arrest and detention after the episode. Society and the youth are victims when a youth is thrown away by the parents or guardian.

While a great deal of this presentation has been somewhat "research" oriented, the results affect the public's role in providing programming to meet the basic survival needs of these youth.

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